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"Without work one would die of hunger or be deported."

Work Makes You Free

BY SALOMEA KAPE

I felt hands touching my chest and descending to the lower part of my body and a wave of nausea rose in my stomach. The curious and nervous hands belonged to a short woman of an uncertain age and a mannish behavior. She was thorough in this personal search, a frisking, that she carried out every day—twice a day—on two hundred workers in this workshop known for producing rubber coats for the German soldiers in Lodz Ghetto, called Gummi Ressort.

I masked my repulsion, smiled instead, and said, "I am a new worker. What should I do?"

The woman looked at me and answered in a peevish old voice. "They are sending us more and more children and, believe me, the work here is hard. It's not a kindergarten."

"I'm not a child," I protested, "I'm fifteen years old and even ten year olds are working."

I also didn't like the unfriendly woman who sat in the entrance of the factory greeting everyone with a suspicious eye as if saying: "You-are-a-thief-and-one-day-I'll-catch-you," although there was nothing to steal in the Gummi Ressort. This woman had the eyes of a ghetto policeman.

But I was happy to have a job for it brought the right to food

rations and a soup. Without work one would die of hunger or be deported.

The school I had attended in the ghetto had been closed two months ago. I had studied without much enthusiasm for I asked myself questions such as: "Why should I study Latin when I'll just die of typhoid fever or starvation? How much will the laws of thermodynamics be of help during the deportation? What is the difference between the death of an educated and an uneducated person?

In school I had thought of myself as a singer for singing brought me some recognition, some fame. I had strong vocal cords and a very imperfect pitch, but nobody noticed or cared. I had even changed my name to Cleo Mustache because the combination of the exotic name Cleo with the name Mustache was funny, grabbed attention and enhanced my popularity. Soon my real name was forgotten but Cleo was more quickly remembered with every new song I had performed in school. I had basked in the glow of being a celebrity.

I had even sung for Rumkowski, the Elder of the Jews in Lodz Ghetto, when he had visited the school. He had had tears in his eyes when he kissed my forehead and thanked me for the song that he said touched his Jewish heart. A picture of the Chairman kissing me had been taken by a photographer who was always present among the cohort of bodyguards, advisors, sycophants and young secretaries. Rumkowski had grown imperial surrounded by people who tried to anticipate his every wish.

Six months later with the photo in my pocket I had gone straight to Rumkowski's office hoping to remind him of this unforgettable event and to ask for a job. I didn't know that he was isolated from the outer world by secretaries and other nondescript types, all young, well nourished, well dressed and splendid looking. The secretary lowest in rank stopped me in her miniscule office and asked impatiently, "Why should the Elder of the Jews remember you?"

Ha, I had the photo, the best evidence that Rumkowski was brought to tears by my singing.

"I sang in the school for him. Now I need a job, any job."

The young woman's face showed some interest. "Ah. A singer. Sing a few songs for me."

"It was an order and "please" would have been out of place. I sang till I exhausted my repertoire, and my voice even in the lower register was raspy and barely audible.

"May I see the Chairman now?" I asked in a whisper.

"Rumkowski?" The young woman yawned as if awakening from a pleasant dream. "I can't reach him. Go home and never come here again."

I left the small cubicle and something screamed inside me: "You were a clown, a jester not to the 'king' but to the king's lackey. You reached bottom."

My mother took one look at me when I got home and asked, "What happened?" She had put a loaf of bread, a small amount of brown sugar and chicory coffee on the table. She was tired from standing for hours in the food line and she soon had to start night duty in the hospital. I preferred not to answer. I wanted to disappear from the face of the earth, no, not to die, but to evaporate for awhile.

"You must be hungry," my mother said and gave me a piece of bread. "Here is your portion of bread for today. Divide it into three parts and eat one slice now."

I looked at the small portion that had to be divided into smaller parts. I could have eaten the whole loaf of bread and still would have been hungry. It seemed I had a bottomless, insatiable stomach. Not only the empty stomach but the whole body demanded nourishment and the brain didn't stop thinking of food. Even at night elaborate meals appeared in my dreams. A strong voice inside me cried to eat the loaf of bread, to swallow it in one gulp and to silence my hunger at least for an hour. But a weaker and more resolute voice kept telling that I'd regret it and pay for it with six hungry days, and only the daily watery soup which would not suffice and would further aggravate my hunger. Six breadless days could become a one-way ticket to the bottom of ghetto life. No, I didn't want to join the *klepsydras* with swollen ankles, and the clumsy gait known as the *klepsydra shuffle.* They died in their filthy rooms or were the first candidates for deportation.

I swallowed a small portion of the bread and admitted to my mother, "I tried to get a job from Rumkowski but I didn't succeed."

"Silly child," said my mother, "Rumkowski is unreachable, but I know the manager of a coat factory. I delivered his baby before the war when he was a poor tailor and now, only God knows how, he became a director of a workshop and he's an important fish in the ghetto's dirty waters."

Through my mother's connection I got the job; and the woman with the exploring hands took me into a long cavernous hall where large tables were lined up against the walls. The hall was silent, semi-dark, only raw bulbs above each table threw circular light on the heavy military coats laying on the tables. The parts of the coats, like pieces of a gigantic puzzle, were glued together with caoutchouc by a group of three to four women working at each table. The sweet, irritating smell of the thick glue hung in the air causing coughing spells, yellowing of the skin and rumors that the glue was toxic. Life in the ghetto was founded on rumors and most of them were true.

Gummi Ressort employed mostly women. A few sewing machines squeezed at the corners of the hall were operated by men.

"Cleo!" I heard a young friendly voice and knew that it must be a schoolmate. "What are you doing here? Do you remember me? I'm Anya."

It must have been her beak of a nose, the eyes narrowly set or maybe the thin legs or the chirp of her voice that made me think of a sparrow.

"Anya! Sure, I remember you. It's my first day here and I'm lost. What am I supposed to do?"

"You'll work with us. We have a fine group of girls our age. Let me talk to the supervisor." Anya's voice had the assurance of an old-timer who knew her way around. One hour later I was a part of the group of three girls working at the same table.

"Here's Fela." Anya introduced a blond girl who vigorously shook my hand.

"Hi, Cleo, I love your name. It has an operatic ring to it."

Fela had a low throaty voice and her friendly smile transformed the irregular features of her face into an almost handsome one. The third girl, Halina, seemed to be a bit young, a cute little girl with watchful big, blue eyes filling half of her face. She acknowledged my presence with a nod of her head and said loudly, "Cleo? It sounds like a loo."

Then she laughed maliciously like an adult. I felt that I could easly have killed her for the comparison but I smiled sourly instead.

Fela said, "You'll start with the easiest part of the coat. The belt. It's simple but don't leave traces of the glue on the belt for it's very hard to remove the hardened glue. The coat must be spotless otherwise it may not pass the inspection."

Fela evidently was in charge of the group. She had a pair of skillful, quick hands and glued the parts of the coat with precision, joking at the same time as her thin body with the match-like legs seemed to be dancing. Anya was a rather disorganized worker, but had control over the pieces. The best was Halina who put into the coat-making all her enegry and concentration. She didn't talk or smile and often looked nervously at the clock as if she were racing against time.

I catapulted into a job for which I was unprepared and within a few days it became evident that I would never develop any skills in the production of the coats and it would be in the best interest of the group to leave me at the belt level. The belts in my hands were never straight and white patches of glue grew like mushrooms on their black and shiny surfaces. I was easily bored with the monotony of my work and due to the boredom I produced more defective belts.

Fourteen-year-old Halina with the child's face and false laughter complained to Fela, "Cleo has two left hands and she doesn't fit into our group. We're earning less since she's with us. I don't want to work with her."

A clash between us was predictable. I never forgot the "loo" and was open in my unfriendly feelings toward her. But Halina was secretive, more convoluted, hiding her hostility behind her shrill laughter. She was nobody's friend and in her childish fervor she wanted to be the best worker.

Fela looked at her and said, "You're the youngest and you have the biggest mouth. Give her time. She'll learn."

Halina didn't answer, but after a week she asked to be transferred to another group.

Our supervisor was Ada, a young woman in her early twenties who graduated just before the war from the best college in Lodz. She was by her appearance, superior upbringing and elegance unsuited for

her job in the ugly Gummi Ressort. I thought that everything about Ada was artificial starting with her powdered, dead-pale face, the far-off look in the big brown eyes and the fire-red lipstick on her full lips. Her natural assets were a classical figure and a pair of long, shapely legs. In this smelly place Ada was overdressed in a perfectly tailored skirt and a white blouse which emphasized even more the contrasting colors of her face. She moved between the tables like a movie star accustomed to applause and adoration; well, like a star of the silent movies, for she seldom spoke.

"She must dream of some of the doctors, lawyers and dentists she could have married if it weren't for the war," I remarked to Anya.

"Ada doesn't need a well-to-do husband; her papa has a high position in the ghetto and she has enough bread and butter, and plenty of elegant clothing."

I wouldn't dare to criticize Ada in Fela's presence for Fela had fallen under Ada's spell and the aloof and cool beauty reciprocated the friendship. Only Fela induced a smile on Ada's powdered face. The manager of the Gummi Ressort paraded in the workshop in shining, black high boots and black britches, Nazi style, and his eyes followed Ada. He had a swelled head, this tailor who before the war couldn't sell his raincoats, and was leaning heavily on his rich father-in-law who was an important figure in the demimonde of Lodz. The manager was now quite handsome, as if he had gained in height, in weight, in presence, in importance, and had become a much stronger version of himself. He talked to Ada in his broken Polish; he told stillborn jokes followed by his own laughter and called her to his office many times. She always came out flushed with embarrassment, powdering her nose in a fury. The girls in the group nodded approvingly of her behavior. Ada deserved a much better man than this semi-literate, married ignoramus with a family.

I witnessed Fela's successes in passing the garments. The supervisors examined each piece of a coat; the spots had to be cleaned and every defect corrected. It took hours to pass the scrupulous inspection except when Fela presented her coats in the examining room. Fela started

the ritual with small talk followed by a joke, a song, a dance, a funny monologue in the best tradition of a born comedienne. The supervisors listened while cleaning and making repairs on Fela's coats for they didn't want to interrupt a performance given by a gifted youngster who had a rhythm section and a pulse in her voice.

This planted an idea in my head about my singing. I saw an audience eager to listen to a song in this workshop and I could use the voice of Fela and maybe Anya, who had inherited her father's musical talents. Singing was needed in this place, I decided, where young girls looked like old women and children looked like adults. Many of the women were alone, having lost their families to hunger or deportation; some were already sick and all of them were hungry. I knew them all.

Gerda, who came from Berlin, showed me an airplane during lunchtime, a Messerschmidt with two big swastikas on its wings, high in the blue sky and she exclaimed in ecstasy, *"Unsere Flugzeuge, our airplanes."* I couldn't understand her love for the executioner but I noticed Gerda's prematurely gray hair, the jaundice-yellow color the glue painted on her skin and the beads of sweat on her forehead. I could hear the rumble and growl in her empty stomach and I felt Gerda's hunger and loneliness as if my own.

She's *pre-klepsydra,* I thought taking a second look at Gerda. I could visualize her as a young girl walking the wide avenues of her native Berlin. Gerda had arrived in Lodz Ghetto well dressed and good looking, with a mother, father and two sisters. Within a year Gerda had lost every member of her family, and the dresses, shoes, sweaters and coats were sold for a soup or a few potatoes. Bread was much more expensive. She was now alone in a cold and filthy room with golden memories of better times in Berlin. She was now too weak and couldn't clean her room anymore. She ate her loaf of bread as soon as she got it from the distribution point and was mad-hungry for the rest of the week. Hungry, filthy and sick she slowly slipped to the lower depths of ghetto life. But even the desiccated and starved Gerda wanted a song.

"Sing *Stille Nacht,"* she asked and I learned the song but within a few weeks a new girl took Gerda's place at the table and the Christmas song was the only reminder of a girl named Gerda.

The sixteen year old Ina lost her parents during the deportations and lived in a little, clean room alone. "My mother's voice is telling me to keep the room and my clothes clean," she told me and forgetting her next thought she asked me to sing. I knew what it meant to hear voices and thought that the sweet Ina was not speaking loosely but was really mentally sick.

There were many other women, mothers without children, children without mothers, wives without husbands, single girls, and all of them liked the singing after lunch while the spirits were a little higher. During the lunch hour they ate the thin soup with a few scraps of potato quickly, alone, joylessly. Heavy, swollen eyelids covered their watery eyes, and a clean discharge ran from their noses. The meal was finished within a few minutes leaving a tormenting hunger in their bellies.

I started to write new lyrics to the old tunes, and the belts showed a progressive deterioration. Children gathered around our table in the rare moments of rest. After a month Fela withdrew from singing. She couldn't catch her breath between the coughing spells followed by chills and fever.

"You should see a doctor," Anya recommended.

"I'm fine. Let's wait. It's a cold." But in matter of days Fela was confined to bed at home with a diagnosis of tuberculosis.

"She'll never survive without soup." Anya was a strong believer in the healing powers of soup. "We might forge Fela's signature and take the soup for her but it's risky and we shouldn't do it. It must go through the legal channels with the manager's approval and Ada's the only person who could convince him to grant a soup for Fela."

"She must choose between her dislike for this man and her friendship for Fela. I don't know which will prevail. She's a complicated character and I don't trust her too much." Old antipathies die hard and I felt free to express my feelings in Fela's absence.

We approached Ada. She listened carefully to our plan and didn't say a word, but the same day she delivered a container with soup. I took the warm soup to Fela's house at lunchtime. The ghetto streets were empty and I could hear my own steps when I was climbing the stairs of the bridge which connected the two parts of the ghetto. From above I saw the German guards with the rifles on their shoulders.

The guards liked to shoot Jews crossing the bridge; it was like aiming at the birds. I was always frightened while walking on the bridge. But in the mornings and the evenings when Fela had crossed the bridge I had felt that the crowd shielded her. Now I was alone, an easy target for a bored soldier and I talked to myself soundlessly: "Persevere, just keep going, don't pay attention to anyone around you," but I don't know which was running faster, my legs or my heart.

Fela ate the soup and only her hacking cough in between the quick gulps interrupted the silence. She was lost in the big bed and looked much smaller lying on the large pillows. The room was almost sterile, empty, with a cold oven stand in the corner and without the smell of food.

"Fela," I couldn't erase the fear from my voice, "I can't do it any more. I was so scared while I was walking on the bridge. I'll bring soup after work, on my way home."

"You're already doing too much. I'll be back soon." She didn't look like she was on her way to recovery. Her deep voice was reduced to a whisper and fever flushed her cheeks.

We were so busy delivering soup to Fela that at first we didn't notice the change in Ada. She was spending more time in the manager's office and after each meeting there she appeared in the hall showing redness in the face that the thickest layer of powder couldn't cover.

One day the manager's wife came to the factory and made a big scene. Anya and Sally heard her ranting against Ada. The wife said she had overheard some gossip, but her vulgar expressions didn't fit the well educated, composed and elegant Ada.

The manager was in a very uncomfortable situation between the wrath of his wife and his longing for Ada. He ordered Anya and me to stop singing because the songs got on his nerves. "This is not a theater or a vaudeville," he said. "We must *arbeiten, arbeiten.*" He emphasized the oft-repeated Rumkowski's phrase that sounded like a Nazi command. He quickly added, "*Arbeit macht frei*—the work will set us free—not the songs."

But we still sang in hushed voices until the manager separated us and sent us to different tables. After two days the silence was broken by a simmering discontent followed by loud voices requesting,

"Cle-o, A-nya, Cle-o, A-nya. Sing. Sing."

A menacing chorus of women surrounded the manager who came running to the hall. He couldn't understand why his workshop was in an uproar over nothing, not for bread, not for soup, not for better wages, but for a song! The women, if you call women those skeletons without breasts and buttocks, were more to be pitied than punished.

To call the police? The former tailor who was walking like a pasha in his harem of two hundred hungry women was too smart to use the police. After all he wasn't a malicious man. He looked around and ordered in his most commanding voice: "Cleo and Anya back to your old table."

And we continued bringing soup to Fela.